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DEPARTMENT FOR D, AF A/S JENDAYI FRAZER, AF/SPG, SE
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SUBJECT: THE NATIONAL CONGRESS PARTY - SUDAN'S BRUTAL
PRAGMATISTS

REF: A. KHARTOUM 300
[1](#)B. 07 KHARTOUM 1760
[1](#)C. 07 KHARTOUM 1051

Classified By: CDA Alberto M. Fernandez, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: After almost 20 years in power, the ruling National Congress Party has reach a level of cynical (and often brutal) pragmatism making it fully capable of making and keeping arrangements with the West on Darfur and on the CPA, as long as its core interest of remaining in power in Khartoum is protected. The NCP is also quite willing and capable of wrapping itself in an Islamist mantle, obfuscating and returning to mass murder if those steps better address its core interests. The regime's chief weakness remains its own internal rivalries and a multiplicity of domestic challenges which it must weigh in the context of any workplan for improving relations with the West. End summary.

CAN THE LEOPARD CHANGE ITS SPOTS?

[1](#)2. (C) Since January 2008, the Sudanese Government has exchanged fire with a UNAMID convoy, clashed with a French EUFOR patrol (on Sudanese soil), threatened to expel the UNAMID Chief of Staff and the US Charge d'Affaires, break off intelligence cooperation with the U.S., has warned of the possibility of increasing pressure on the US diplomatic mission in Sudan, and, most significant of all, attacked and burned most of three small towns in West Darfur, killing dozens of civilians and creating tens of thousands of new refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Not a pretty picture and yet, when CDA Fernandez recently spoke with a veteran humanitarian activist in Sudan, who has seen the aftermath of Sudanese massacres in both Darfur and South Sudan in past years and decades, the activist emphatically claimed, "considering the nature of the beast, they are actually on their best behavior."

[1](#)3. (C) An alternate list of events since January 2008 would catalogue the renewal of the yearly Humanitarian NGO bureaucratic moratorium (which "fast-tracks" NGO access to Darfur), a signed SOFA with UNAMID, the withdraw of SAF units from Southern oil fields, NCP outreach to Northern opposition political parties, additional flexibility on Abyei's borders, and substantive outreach to the US and UK by Khartoum to improve relations with their main Western critics.

[1](#)4. (C) While it is often easy to recite a litany of Khartoum's double-dealing and duplicity, the longer, slower trends over the past months are sometimes harder to visualize and easily ignored: 14,000 aid workers (one thousand of them foreigners) work in Darfur today (a number which has been steady since 2004) providing life-saving assistance, rebel

leader Suleiman Jamous was released in September and 1600 new African peacekeepers with their APCs deployed in October/November with the cooperation of the Sudanese Government. There is painstakingly slow, but steady progress nonetheless on most issues related to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, UNAMID is deploying at a glacial pace but many outside observers (and even within the UN) blame the UN's own inadequacies more than Khartoum's very real but often minor obstacles and irritants. And finally, South Sudan's share of Sudan's oil revenues are providing unprecedented levels of funding for that neglected and devastated region - despite evidence of late and incomplete payments.

15. (C) How to characterized this reality? Most observers generally offer two contradictory analyses: many in the West see the Khartoum regime as essentially dishonest, tricksters who will cheat and break every agreement with anyone foolish enough to trust them. Khartoum's apologists, by contrast, in many Arab capitals and Beijing, see any problems that may exist - whether with UNAMID or CPA - as essentially "technical in nature" (a word favored by the Chinese Ambassador in Khartoum), procedural issues that can and should be worked through and can be resolved if the regime is given "a little more time, patience or understanding."

NILOTIC NIHILISTS SCHEME FOR POWER

16. (C) From Embassy Khartoum's perspective, both analyses are at least partially true but fail to tell the whole story of the National Congress Party (NCP) of President Omar Al-Bashir's hold on power. The almost 19-year rule of the NCP is the longest and, by most standards, most successful reign in independent contemporary Sudanese history. Growing out of

KHARTOUM 00000338 002 OF 003

the Islamist student activism of the Muslim Brotherhood, passing through the same Messianic revolutionary salafi/jihadi violence that gave birth to Al-Qa'ida, the NCP today is a fractious oligarchy obsessed with only one thing: their hold on power in Sudan - as a political entity, a social class and as individuals in rivalry with each other. Despite their education and worldliness, they are insular, coming from the same region in Sudan and having relationships going back to the same elite Khartoum high-school. They are also undisciplined, despite the apparently ferocious attention to detail they often show. Some say that the constant shifts between regime power players reminds them of the end of the Nimeiry dictatorship although the current regime is much more solid than Nimeiry's last days.

17. (C) But they are brutal pragmatists, well educated but toxic cosmopolitans, ready to negotiate, to deal, to compromise in order to tighten their grip on the real levers of power in Sudan or to escalate into mass murder and outright defiance if that is called for. While not wildly popular, they do have a mass base. While less organized than they appear, they are very experienced in politics, negotiation and deception and better prepared than any other political entity in Sudan (the SPLM coming in a somewhat distant second). They remain Islamist (aside from patronage, that is still the basis of their popular appeal) but their view of power politics in Sudan is highly rational. Their motivation is Islamic the same way the Godfather's Corleone family's motivation is Catholic.

18. (C) This motivation has two sources today. The first is the struggle for power, for succession to the lackadaisical President Al-Bashir, for strengthening one's internal power base and for the right to exclusively whisper in Al-Bashir's ear in the meantime. This struggle is not ideological nor does it predictably reflect the level of criminality of the regime or the varying levels of hostility towards the United States. It is the "moderate, pro-American" Vice-President Ali Osman Taha who oversaw Darfur policy in the worst years (2003-2005) of the violence there, while the "radical,

Islamist" Nafie Ali Nafie was marginalized at the time. Both rivals are handicapped by their non-military backgrounds and will play the hardliner or spoiler if it suits their personal interests. Meanwhile, the "anti-Western" Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and "pro-American" National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) both played equally murky roles in Darfur's turbid waters. In this internecine struggle between institutions and individuals, the friendship and support of the United States is a commodity like no other, "the holy grail of Sudanese politics," a deliverable that Ali Osman Taha failed to deliver in the heady days of his ascendancy as the CPA was being finalized (2003-2005, the same years as the worst violence in Darfur).

¶9. (C) The second motivation for the regime, inextricably tied to the personal and partisan lust for power, is the calendar. Three dates loom large in the NCP's calculations: November 2008, July 2009, and July 2011. The upcoming American presidential elections, probable Sudanese elections next year, and the CPA-mandated referendum on independence for South Sudan will together determine Sudanese history, the survival of the NCP and the individual fates of its corrupt and scheming mandarins. The correlation of these three dates could work to sweep the NCP from power or ensure its long term survival.

A GIANT WITH FEET OF CLAY

¶10. (C) Although the NCP is without a doubt the most powerful political force in the country it is not a monolithic dictatorship. There is actually a political vacuum in Sudan that neither the NCP nor the SPLM have yet been able to fill. Aside from internal fissures, the country's huge size and complexity make total control difficult. Even though Sudan is wealthier today than ever in its history, the regime awash with money to bribe, loot and, even sometimes, build, it suffers from the usual pressures of a rentier economy dependent on natural resource extraction: high inflation, a hollowing out of agriculture, and endemic corruption. War is expensive so the regime's favored course of action is "war by other means" - counterinsurgency on the cheap, co-opting opponents and internal subversion, propaganda and dirty tricks operations - this is true in both Darfur and in the regime's relationship with the SPLM and South Sudan (with the SPLM trying to take some of the same plays out of the NCP's playbook in return).

KHARTOUM 00000338 003 OF 003

¶11. (C) While the three dates represent opportunity, they also are dangerous for the NCP. Their chief concern is that, as seemed to happen during the October-December 2007 cabinet crisis with the SPLM, all Sudan's problems will run together into "a perfect storm" capable of sweeping them from power: an angry and intransigent United States supporting a united and empowered SPLM which has intimate ties with "marginalized Sudanese" (in Darfur and East Sudan). Such a potential scenario actually led to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and it is fear of its re-emergence that motivates the need "to get our own house in order" as President Al-Bashir told Special Envoy Williamson.

¶12. (C) The best case scenario, as far as the NCP is concerned, is being able to strike some sort of arrangement on improved relations with the United States ("an implicit blessing" where the U.S. leads, the West will follow, the Sudanese believe) that allows the regime to parlay such a deal into some sort of electoral mandate in 2009 giving the NCP long-sought democratic credentials. Simultaneously the NCP hopes to strike a similar deal with the SPLM which either preserves unity (still a preferred option for the NCP but perhaps unrealistic) or an arrangement which allows South Sudan to go its own way in peace at the highest price possible extracted from them in terms of oil wealth and allowing the NCP a free hand in the north.

¶13. (C) The NCP will continue to patiently work to undermine its junior partners within the SPLM by manipulating the South's and the Movement's own weaknesses and personality clashes: non-Dinka (Equatorians, Nuer, Shilluk) fears of Dinka domination, the personal ambition of politicians such as Riek Machar, and the lack of capacity, corruption and thirst for power. Meanwhile the NCP will hold out real olive branches to the SPLM in terms of a division of the spoils between elites, a Faustian bargain some in the SPLM may find irresistible.

¶14. (C) Given this potential "best case scenario," the NCP will seek to deal with the United States in earnest, based on self interest, as long as it feels it has something to gain in advancing its internal political agenda (avoiding the "perfect storm" while hoping for the "implicit blessing") and that the alternatives are worse. The key caveats to watch are the internal fissures within the ruling cupola (and the all-important relationship with the SAF) and the rivalry/partnership with the SPLM - an independent actor with its own agenda and cost-benefit calculations. The SPLM does not want a rapprochement between Washington and Khartoum that would leave it exposed to the full force of NCP machinations.

¶15. (C) Such widely divergent scenarios are not new for Sudan. The NCP came to power in a military coup to prevent a peace deal with the SPLM in 1989, a deal it signed in 2005. At one point the regime was ostracized by its Arab neighbors because of support for Saddam Hussein in 1990, and almost went to war with Egypt later on after complicity in an assassination attempt on President Mubarak. The regime doggedly reformed these shattered relationships. Having enjoyed the fruits of power for almost two decades, the brutal pragmatists of the NCP search for ways to enjoy their now considerable but still ill-gotten gains, avoid winding up in an ICC jail, and consolidate their hold on power by either manipulating or striking a deal with their main national and international concerns - the SPLM internally and the United States on the international stage. "Whatever works" is their motto and in this there is both opportunity and peril for them and for those sitting across the table from them.

¶16. (C) What does this mean for U.S. policy? The U.S. must stay the course of continued sanctions and other pressures while continuing targeted engagement to achieve our policy objectives - tangible improvement in the humanitarian situation in Darfur and implementation of the CPA. Carefully calibrated discussions with the NCP will allow us to engage in these critical areas while holding out the possibility of an improved relationship as defined by the Sudanese. Even a slight improvement in the relationship, however, would serve the Sudanese Government's interests, so we must be judicious in what we offer and clear about what we will receive in return.

FERNANDEZ